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Hogwash about the CIA



Harry S. Truman



Sen. Eugene McCarthy



CIA's McCone

WASHINGTON In all fairness, it is time somebody had a kind word to say for the poor old Central Intelligence Agency. The CIA is rather like the boy in school who always gets slapped around because everybody knows he won't hit back.

The State Department has slapped the CIA hard for "invading the policy-making field," on the grounds that the agency briefed some newspapermen on the sad state of the Soviet economy. A lot of the press has also been slapping the CIA around, and a few highly respectable journals have even half-echoed the Communist *Worker's* charge that Lee Harvey Oswald, murderer of President Kennedy, went to the Soviet Union in 1959 as a CIA hireling.

Former President Harry Truman has got in his licks. "I never had any thought when I set up CIA," he has written, "that it would be injected into the peacetime cloak-and-dagger business." Sen. Eugene McCarthy, in an article recently published in this magazine (Jan. 4-11), has charged that the CIA is getting out of hand. Neither the President nor the Congress, the senator maintains, really controls the agency or knows what it is up to.

Somebody certainly blundered when the CIA held a mass press conference on the Soviet economy, and let reporters name the agency as their source, that with all due respect to a former President and an able senator, the other charges against CIA are a lot of hogwash. Let us consider them, in order.

First, Lee Harvey Oswald never at any time had any connection whatever with CIA, although suspicions on that score are perhaps natural in view of the mystery surrounding Oswald's travels and his sources of income. The highest officials of the CIA are ready to so testify—and indignantly—before the Warren Commission investigating the murder. "If anybody in the CIA had hired so obvious a psychotic," says one of the greatest experts in the intelligence business, "he should have been fired on the spot."

Second, the odd fact is that Harry S. Truman himself put the CIA into the "peacetime cloak-and-dagger business." The CIA's operational, or cloak-and-dagger, unit was established by President Truman's National Security Council in the summer of 1948, after the Communists grabbed Czechoslovakia. In the subsequent four and a half years, before President Truman stepped down, certain highly effective secret operations were mounted with the President's full knowledge and approval.

Third, the notion that neither Congress nor the President controls the agency or knows what it is doing is nonsense. The CIA is unquestionably the most supervised agency in the Government—dozens of people spend much of their time breathing down its neck.

The neck-breathers include four subcommittees of Congress, headed by Representatives Carl Vinson and Clarence Cannon, and Senators Richard Russell and Carl Hayden. These congressional grandees are acutely jealous of congressional prerogatives, and they are not about to let any executive agency, in Senator McCarthy's words, "decide for itself just how much or how little Congress ought to know."

Neither CIA director John McCone nor his predecessor, Allen Dulles, when meeting in closed session, ever refused a candid answer to any question. To cite one example, contrary to the popular mythology, the four subcommittees were thoroughly briefed on the U-2 operation virtually from its inception.

By the same token, ever since Mr. Truman established the operational section, every President has been thoroughly informed of every important secret operation. And every President has had, and sometimes exercised, an absolute veto power over any operation. When there have been disputes on major policy matters between the CIA and the State Department or the Pentagon, the last word in the argument has always been the President's. Again contrary to the popular mythology, President Eisenhower personally authorized the U-2 flight which Khrushchev used to break up the 1960 summit meeting.

Moreover, the President has plenty of help in keeping an eye on the agency. For example, a blue-ribbon presidential board, headed by former White House counsel Clark Clifford, is charged with continuous supervision of the agency. And there are all sorts of special committees, like that headed by Under Secretary of State Avroreil Harriman, with responsibility in the field of subversion and guerrilla warfare.

It is just plain silly, in short, to suppose that the CIA is "a law unto itself." The real danger is that the CIA will become a vast cautious bureaucracy, bound by the lowest common denominator of timidity among its innumerable supervisors. The CIA in any case spends less than a third of the money and "owns" less than a quarter of the people in the intelligence business. The Pentagon intelligence agencies, the Defense Intelligence Agency and the National Security Agency, spend most of the money and own most of the people, but nobody seems interested in supervising them.

The NSA particularly could do with a bit of supervision. It has a horrible security record. Recent cases include a couple of homosexuals who defected to the Soviet Union and spilled all the beans; and an Army sergeant who collected \$50,000 from Russian agents for really important American secrets, and spent the loot in the most conspicuous possible way on mistresses, motor yachts and the like. If the CIA had been responsible for either case, there would have been a hellablood to make the Alger Hiss case seem tame.

In fact, the CIA has not yet suffered a single known defection or penetration, which is better than par for the course. Certainly there are misdeeds in the agency, and certainly it has had its failures, in the Bay of Pigs and elsewhere.

But those who enjoy slapping the CIA around ought to ask themselves what might have happened if Mr. Truman had not been wise enough to put CIA into "the peacetime cloak-and-dagger business." It is virtually certain that parts of the world now free would be under Communist control. It is absolutely certain that we would disastrously lack the solid information on Soviet missile-nuclear capabilities which we now have, thanks to the CIA-created U-2 and reconnaissance satellites. If Mr. Truman had not been wiser than he remembers being, we would be today like the only blindfolded man in a murder.

Stewart Alsop